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AUTHOR MacLennan, Carol
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study to determine what various groups of teachers and prospective teachers consider to be the aims of the Hong Kong education system in relation to their teacher education courses. The participants were uncertified preservice teachers in their second and third years of study, certificated inservice teachers, and uncertified inservice teachers. The first section of the paper reviews background issues, including financing education, the teacher's role, and quality in education. The first part of the study was a questionnaire relating participants perception of the aims and objectives of their teacher education courses and comparing the response of certificated and uncertificated teachers to various aspects of their courses. The second part of the study focused on students' view of the curriculum, using a checklist of items considered the most and the least important in relation to Hong Kong's schools. Both preservice students and inservice certificated teachers rated practical teaching as the main purpose of teacher education courses. The inservice uncertificated teachers rated benefits to society, such as improving the education system, as the main purpose. All three groups rated practical teaching skills as the primary reason for taking a teacher education course. The study also illustrated that student teachers seemed to have no particular common focus, and appeared to find little coherence within their courses. The report suggests more effort may be needed to help students realize how their teacher education courses fit together to become the body of professional knowledge to which all educators subscribe. (ND)

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Teaching and teacher education: What the students say.

Carol MacLennan

The ELT scene, perhaps more than most, seems predisposed to welcome new methods, approaches, -isms and buzz words of various kinds. A recent invader in the field is the notion of *Quality* Control which refers to students as clients or customers while paying lipservice to their needs and wants. This study was undertaken to find out, not what educators, or administrators or the syllabus or mission statements proclaim, but what students teachers themselves say about education and the education of teachers.

First the context within which the study was undertaken will be described. This will be followed by initial findings from the study itself.

The aim of the study

The study reported in this paper was undertaken to determine what various groups of teachers and prospective teachers consider to be the aims of the Hong Kong education system in relation to their teacher education courses. Before setting out on a journey most travellers usually take the precaution of outlining an itinerary, considering the experiences they hope to undergo, the knowledge or information they hope to acquire and the important places they will visit along the way. It is less evident if students setting out on a career engage in similar mental preparation before embarking on a course of study therefore the present investigation is an initial attempt to find out if this is the case.

Education is not a static concept, but is continually in flux, adapting to changes in knowledge and to the needs and concerns of each generation of students, teachers and other interested groups as information is discovered and disseminated . In fact, education is about change: change in skills, change in attitudes, change in what is known and how it is applied. Changing the behaviour of learners is a major function of education which increases in difficulty with the age of the target population. Adult learners (even adolescents) have already invested much time and effort in the learning process and are

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not easily persuaded to give up old learning for new unless they can be convinced that the payoff, for them, is high enough. To persuade would-be learners that further learning is necessary is an essential part of a teacher's task.

Outlining the problem

If student teachers, at whatever stage in their development, whether pre-service or currently practicing are to (a) benefit maximally from their studies and (b) prepare themselves to become the facilitators of change in the schools of Hong Kong tomorrow then the aims and objectives which they perceive as being relevant to the Hong Kong education system are of considerable importance. What present and future teachers believe their roles in the schools to be is a vital part of the educational process which undoubtedly influences what happens in classrooms. These factors should not be ignored.

Background issues

(a) Financing Education

Although educational reform is an issue of current interest to governments in many countries education is an area for which politicians are seldom prepared to support substantial budgets. The fact that teachers' salaries account for 'the largest share of any education budget' (Cheng, 1994; 13) is generally regarded as a matter for reproach rather than an accepted means of investment in the population of the future.

Governments in many countries continue to look for short-cuts which allow them to underpay teachers and penny-pinch on their education, while failing to consider that schools without teachers would be about as useless as hospitals without doctors.

What *is* agreed upon, however, is that the success or failure of any innovations in the education system depend, to a large extent on the attitude and behaviour of teachers. However, teachers are often the last to be consulted and the first to be censured when administrative changes are in hand.

(b) The Teacher's Role

Having consigned teacher education to the lower end of the priority scale, politicians have in the past attempted to make teaching a matter of technical skill. This aim to control as much as possible what teachers do has lead to the *teacher as technician* approach where the *what, when* and *how* of teaching is subject to regulation, and materials

are designed to be *teacher proof* . In this climate teachers have no scope for autonomy, few opportunities for decision making, and little chance to target their teaching to the actual needs of the individual pupils in their care.

If teachers in Hong Kong now view their role as technicians rather than educators it is because Hong Kong society in general concurs with this opinion. Despite a plethora of Commission reports heralding new approaches to teaching, declarations and statements of concern about students' needs, exhortations to provide 'pupils with pleasurable and rewarding experiences' and to make 'English a "medium of delight"' (Form 1-5 Syllabus Got Printer, HK. 1983; pp12/13), teachers at the chalk -face know that society's not-so hidden agenda for them remains to get as many pupils through examinations as possible. There is little sign at present that this situation is about to change in the near future.

(c) Quality in Education

An aspect of educational reform which has attracted the attention of politicians and administrators is one which, in various guises, sweeps through the business community from time to time. In the 1970's the notion of inputs and outputs as applied to trade and commerce was eventually discovered not to fit neatly with things educational. However, the notion of accountability lingers and resurfaces from time to time as, recently in the impulse for quality assurance (Cheng, (1994); 18ff.) As Cheng points out, professional accountability and Quality Assurance may be conflicting trends. Quality in education may be a much more amorphous concept than it appears to be in other contexts. What is measurable in education may turn out to be peripheral rather than central to improvement, - and it is what is measurable that tends to attract the attention of lay reformers.

Cheng (1994) notes a tension between *managerial* accountability and *professional* accountability which is yet to be resolved, and this leads to attempts to measure quality without knowing how to define it.

Yet another Education Commission Report (Dec, 1994) is, as its title suggests, wholly devoted to the issues of Quality in Education, and the writers of the report bravely attempt to set out parameters which might help to reduce the conflict. These include quality indicators in schools and "System-wide" Education indicators.

(d) Movers and Shapers - What shapes teachers and students' perceptions of educational aims?

Teachers, more than most other educators, face a lonely battle in their attempts to educate since they receive little support for their aims from most sections of the public. Administrators and politicians having interests usually more bureaucratic than strictly educational are seldom supportive, while researchers, often engaged in promoting cherished theories find little time for relating to problems of teachers in schools.

Moreover, much that is counter productive to education, damaging to the child and flies in the face of the teacher's best efforts is sometimes approved and promoted by parents whose goals are often *not* to educate their children but to have their geese impossibly and miraculously turned into swans.

The media, in particular, have much to answer for in terms of education. Despite the educational TV for schools and the apparently educational functions of some entertainment programmes, the daily diet of television programmes, video games, comics and print media publications for children and adolescents, if not completely anti-education, hardly promotes school, values education, or advertises the pleasures and benefits of having a lively and informed mind (Goodlad, 1984,p.42/43)

Even the public in general, who profess to care about education, in fact pay no more than lip service to educational ideals while undermining and underpaying teachers who attempt to make an educated population a reality.

Goodlad, (1990, p. 221) outlines the hypocritical position taken in the USA which extols the 'importance of education and schools on the one hand and denigrates teaching (by maintaining low status and low financial returns) on the other.'

The situation in Hong Kong is not too different. The Department of Education itself has for years drawn its student teachers from the lower end of each cohort of examination passes. Colleges of education have been starved of funds and equipment in ways which have perpetuated the myth of teaching as a *not-quite* profession.

On completing their education (still called *training* by many whom one might hope would know better) new teachers have to make their way in this ambivalent social climate, where the importance of education is proclaimed yet schools are underfunded and teachers

treated as second class citizens. Since the intake for the profession is selected mainly by default from those who feel stigmatised by their failure to obtain entry to a university it is hardly likely that morale will be high.

The new initiatives now in progress to upgrade teacher education and to aim at an all graduate profession in the primary as well as the secondary sector can only be applauded. As Goodlad (1990, p.216) points out 'teachers perpetuate both what they know and how they learn' therefore, in this period of transition, many questions need to be asked and answered. The present study is in several parts only three of which will be discussed here. The first relates to participants perceptions of the aims and objectives of their teacher education courses and compares the responses of certificated and uncertificated teachers to various aspects of their course. Part two focuses on students views on the Hong Kong curriculum. The following *research questions* were addressed:

Part 1 - Teacher Education Courses: (the Questionnaire)

Q1. What do participants consider to be the overall purposes of a teacher education course?

Q2. What reasons do participants give for enrolling for a teacher education course?

Part 2 - Hong Kong schools: (The Checklist)

1. Which items on a given checklist do participants consider are the most and least important in relation to Hong Kong schools?

Method

(a) Participants

The participants were 3 groups of uncertificated preservice student teachers in their second (PU22 / PU32) and third (PU33) year of study, one group of certificated in-service teachers (IC) and one group of uncertificated in-service teachers (IU). A total of ninety-five questionnaires were returned representing 98% return rate for the preservice groups, a 50% return rate for the IC group and a 33% return rate for the IU group. The samples were opportunistic, being students currently enrolled for various teacher education courses in the HKIED. 1994-95 year. The age range was 17 - 40.

(b) Materials

A questionnaire was developed based on issues relevant to teacher education courses. Only the two following questions will be discussed here: Q1A. What, in your opinion, are the overall purposes of a teacher education course? Q2A. What advantages do you expect to gain from taking a teacher education course?

A checklist based on a survey questionnaire described by Goodlad (1990, p.217/8) was prepared to find out which items participants consider to have the highest and lowest priorities in relation to the Hong Kong school curriculum. The items on the checklist are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

(c) Procedures

Both the questionnaire and the checklist were administered during normal lecture periods related to educational issues in Hong Kong schools. On the first occasion the questionnaire was administered and a few weeks later students were given the checklist and asked to prioritise the items on the list. Rating as one - highest- the item in their opinion most relevant and important, - and ten, lowest, - the item they considered to be least relevant and important - to Hong Kong schools.

(d) Data analysis

A set of categories was compiled from the questionnaire responses. These are as follows:

Questionnaire Categories

1. Personal : career, personal development
2. Moral/ idealistic: improvement of education/ society
3. Subject Knowledge: motivated by interest in gaining in-depth knowledge of the subject.
4. Practical Teaching: Focus on Basic Skills; being a *good* teacher; training teachers;
5. Educational Theory; Focus on more than practical skills; theories; models; principles of learning. Goes beyond the technician view.
6. Students/pupils: indicates major concern for helping pupils; or improving their learning.
7. Nil Response
8. Supply/demand: to fill quotas; to provide enough teachers.
9. Social: enjoyment; interaction with other students; exchange ideas.

Typical responses under each heading will be given along with discussion of the results.

Table 2 indicates the results of question 1A.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 2 shows that the preservice students and the inservice certificated teachers both rate practical teaching as the main purpose of teacher education courses, With PU and IC respectively placing 48% and 69% in category 4. Typical responses emphasise *training* rather that educating teachers, *practical* aspects of teaching and what they call relating to the *real* classroom situation. The IC group also include comments such as ' to refresh our teaching knowledge and skills' which relate to their *inservice* status.

The inservice uncertificated IU group place their highest number of responses (64%) in category two. These idealistic comments state that benefits to society such as 'improving the education system', 'strengthening and improving students' future qualifications' and 'improving the quality of teaching and learning' are what they regard as the most important purposes of a teacher education course.

This is summed up by one comment which points out that the long-term aims are 'not just focused on how to be an English teacher in a classroom but (are) also concerned on (sic) the changes and improvements in the upgrading of the English level in Hong Kong'.

The PU group alone among the three refer in 10% of their responses to 'helping their pupils,' to 'foster their future students' and 'to teach the teachers different basic skills to teach pupils'.

The importance of theoretical issues is hardly noted at all with only 9% of the IU group with rather vague comments like 'to obtain some modern teaching methods' being squeezed into category 5 and an even smaller 2% of the PU group responding with comment like 'to learn about what education is'.

It is disappointing that the more experienced teachers in the study fail to comment on the importance of theoretical issues in underpinning classroom practice and to note the value of this aspect of teacher education courses.

Table 3 below shows the results for Question 2A:

Insert Table 3 about here

Table 3 shows that all three groups, the preservice uncertificated students (62%), and the two groups of practicing teachers, the inservice certificated (38%)and the inservice uncertificated (45%) most frequently record practical teaching skills as the reason for taking a teacher education course.

Both groups of inservice teachers see personal career issues 23% and 27% respectively as more of an advantage of a teacher education course for them than do the preservice students. Interestingly enough, more of the uncertificated preservice students (15%) refer to theoretical / educational issues as advantageous than either of the groups who have most practical teaching experience.

It might have been thought that teachers who already have teaching experience would be much more aware of the value and importance of educational theory in relation to their own teaching than preservice students. Although the differences are small this is not the case. The preservice students may be reflecting their course content rather than indicating that they understand there is more to teaching than practical issues and techniques. As with Question 1A (on the purposes of teacher education courses) it is again disappointing that those with more classroom experience fail to place more emphasis on the theoretical since it might be hoped that they would be aware of the need for theoretical justification to underpin their teaching. The overwhelming agreement that practical teaching issues are the raison d'être of teacher education courses and the teaching of basic skills the main function of the education system suggest that the concept of the teacher as technician, with teaching still viewed as little more than sets of technical skills to be learned and appropriately performed, continues to linger on.

The limited concern for developing subject knowledge as an important advantage to be gained from taking a teacher education course is also disappointing. The certificated teachers place more value (19%) on this than the other two groups as Table 4 shows.

Responses from both certificated (23%) and uncertificated (27%) inservice groups indicate that personal/ career-related aims also influenced their decision to enrol for a teacher education course.

Table 4 below indicates the responses to the Checklist.

Insert Table 4 about here

Table 4 shows that 44% of the participants indicate that they consider the teaching of basic skills to be their first priority for inclusion in the Hong Kong school curriculum. A further 36% rate it in the first half of the checklist. With considerably less support but also considered to be a first priority are Values with 15% and Moral understanding, with 13%. Self-realisation was rated a second priority by 23% of the respondents while the development of Critical Thinking was placed second by a further 18%.

The fostering of local culture was placed very low on the scale by most respondents with 31% giving it ninth place on their priority list. The only item given a lower rating was Career Preparation which 40% of this group of pre-and inservice student teachers seem to consider has very little place in the Hong Kong school curriculum. Clearly, this checklist was not developed to fit, or to reflect, the Hong Kong education system, but students' responses to it do provide some interesting slants on what at least some of the territory's current population of student teachers think about the role of education.

What is noteworthy, in addition to the strong consensus towards basic skills, is the wide spread of opinions recorded over all categories with almost each cell in the table being filled by small numbers of entries. This could suggest a commendable degree of independence in students' views. However, it could also suggest that these mainly young, teachers have no particular focus, no central core of aims which are agreed upon and which are being worked towards. If this is the case perhaps it is a signal that teacher education courses should be re-examining their input in these areas. Although conformity

is death to education and discussion, argument and even disagreement are signs of healthy debate. These tentative findings offer a challenge to teacher educators to look to the source of the problem.

In any profession one would expect some polarity around an axis of relevant concepts. The less professional a group are the more aimless, diffuse, and commonsensical their views will probably be. People without professional knowledge have a limited impact on society. The more professional people are the more consensus they are likely to show about issues important to their profession. Unskilled people or lay people may talk a lot about seemingly relevant issues but nothing much usually happens as a result. Stability among professionals is based on established best practice, so lack of stability or consensus is an index of lack of professionalism. Disagreements will arise over points of emphasis, depending on individual styles and approaches, and serious disagreements are usually short-lived. When they do occur they are often due to a paradigm shift within an area of the profession which will swiftly be reconciled as new information is disseminated and new ideas are absorbed by professionals.

The challenge to teacher educators seems to be that students find little coherence within their courses. The areas covered remain separate units or disciplines, separated in students' minds as they are separated physically into their departments. As Mussen et al. (1990) point out, this domain specificity is common in children who fail to make links between what they learn in one area with what is learnt in another. It may be that domain specificity is a more common phenomenon in student teachers than course planners allow for. The responses from participants in this study suggest that they are struggling hard to come to grips with what teaching is all about.

These results seem to be encapsulated in the following quote from Calderhead (1988) who comments that 'as students struggle to find the relevance of College taught theory they may resort to dismissing it in favour of unreflective practice and the imitation of observed classroom routines'. Perhaps more effort needs to be made to spell out the links for students and to help them to recognise how the parts of their teacher education courses fit together to become a whole which in turn becomes the body of professional knowledge to which all educators subscribe.

Do our teacher education courses, in fact, present students with such professional knowledge, or are they still being provided with a hors d'oeuvre of unconnected bits and pieces which encourage them to grasp at practical techniques as the only aspects which they see as relevant. Russell (1988) emphasises the importance of 'direct and explicit attention to the theory-practice relationship from the earliest phases of pre-service teacher education programmes.' These issues are of no small concern in this period of transition from teacher as technician to what it is to be hoped will be the teacher as autonomous professional of the future.

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Table 2:
Comparison of Inter-Group Totals for Q.1A. What, in your, opinion are the overall purposes of a teacher education course?

Group	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
PU	7%	29%	2%	48%	2%	10%	-	3%
IC	4%	27%	-	69%	-	-	-	-
IU	-	64%	-	27%	9%	-	-	-

Table 3:
Comparison of Inter-Group Totals for Q2A: What advantages do you expect to gain from taking a teacher education course?

Group	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
PU	12%	3%	2%	62%	15%	5%	3%
IC	23%	-	19%	38%	11%	-	8%
IU	27%	-	-	45%	9%	9%	9%

Table 4: Group total percentages of responses to the checklist.

Categ.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Basic	44%	6%	5%	6%	15%	8%	6%	2%	0%	6%
2 Citizen	2%	8%	5%	13%	11%	15%	13%	16%	11%	5%
3 Culture	0%	2%	2%	3%	5%	6%	13%	18%	31%	16%
4 Creative	2%	5%	10%	13%	3%	13%	16%	25%	8%	3%
5 Interperp.	3%	13%	21%	10%	13%	13%	11%	5%	3%	5%
6 Self-R	11%	23%	13%	11%	5%	5%	13%	8%	8%	2%
7 Crit. Thk.	5%	18%	5%	13%	11%	10%	5%	8%	6%	8%
8 Career	7%	0%	5%	6%	5%	6%	8%	8%	13%	40%
9 Values	15%	10%	5%	20%	20%	8%	8%	5%	6%	0%
10 Moral	13%	16%	21%	10%	11%	15%	3%	2%	3%	5%

Table 1. The Checklist (after Goodlad).

Which of the following items do you think should be included in the Hong Kong school curriculum?

Please indicate your order of priorities for the following items by numbering the boxes. From 1(highest priority) to 10 (lowest priority).

1. Basic Skills
2. Citizenship
3. Enculturation
4. Creativity
5. Interpersonal understanding
6. Self realisation
7. Critical thinking
8. Career preparation
9. Values
10. Moral understanding